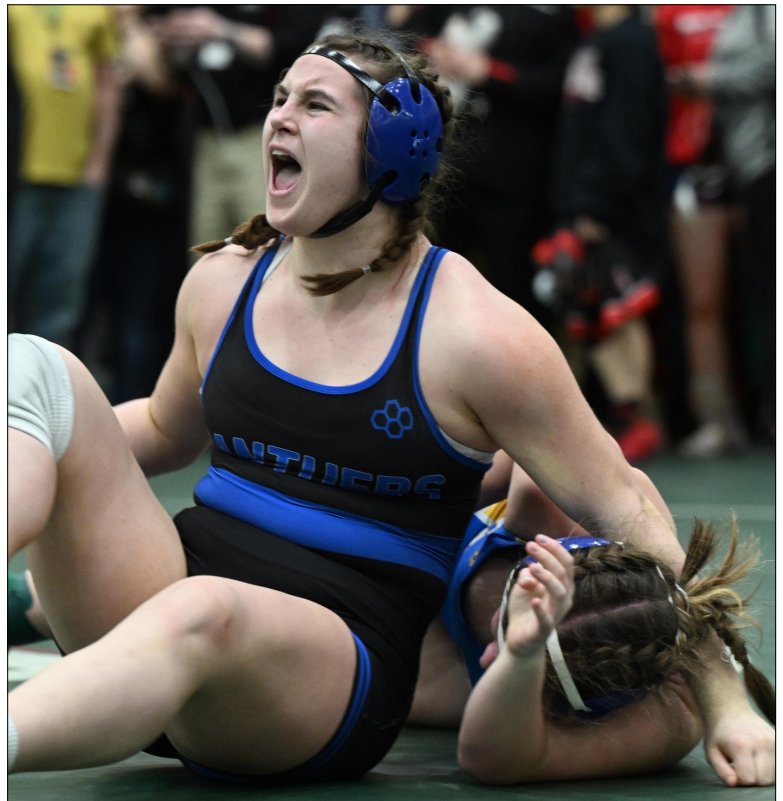


# State Champions



## Collin Gaj completes 49-0 season with title; Caroline Hattala pins four on way to crown

By Gary Wechselblatt

Before last weekend's PIAA wrestling championships for boys and girls, the highly competitive Quakertown Community High School program had three gold medal winners since competition began in 1969, with the last coming in 2006.

Fast forward to last weekend, and that number has grown to five. On Saturday, March 11 sophomore Collin Gaj capped off a 49-0 season with the 145-pound crown. On Sunday, March 12 freshman Caroline Hattala won the 190-pound girls title.

"It's a pretty monumental accomplishment," Coach Kurt Handel said of the individual triumphs, which pushed the boys up to sixth place overall in this year's PIAA team rankings and the girls up to ninth.

Collin's remarkable season included stiff competition in the last two rounds. He defeated bronze medalist Matt Repos of Central Dauphin in the semifinals. Matt, a senior, medaled each of his four years. In the finals, Collin upended two-time state champion Mac Church

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of Waynesburg Central.

"After my last takedown, I look over at the corner and see the coaches with smiles so big," Collin said. "I ran over and gave them hugs. Then I ran over and hugged my family. Definitely won't forget that day forever."

Caroline led the girls, who also had Ashley Stank finish fifth at 100 pounds and

Peyton Fries finished sixth at 190. Hailey Kuliga qualified for the tournament but did not place.

Caroline's accomplishment is even more noteworthy when one considers she's only been wrestling for 10 months. She breezed through the tournament with four pins. "It's a testament to her physical athleticism and quick ability to pick up the skillset of wrestling," Coach Handel said.

"I'm still kind of in shock," Caroline said. "We have such amazing coaches and wrestling partners. I couldn't be more grateful. They've made me into the wrestler that I am. The best part of Quakertown wrestling is everyone's so willing to help. It's really a family here."

On the boys side, all six state qualifiers had victories. Mason Ziegler had an incredible tournament, reaching the finals in the 121-pound class for second place. Calvin Lachman (215 pounds) was one win short of placing. Zach Borzio (152), Gavin Carroll (139), and Ike Williams (114) also qualified for states.

Caroline and Collin join John Rittenhouse (1987), John Hangey (1988) and Pat Flynn (2006) as Quakertown's PIAA champions. Coach Handel said those three all won in their senior seasons. The current champs are set to return for multiple campaigns.

"I've been getting lots of text messages from alumni," Coach Handel said. "It's pretty amazing to see what impact the program makes in the community. It's a bit humbling. That's what makes Quakertown a special place. It's a big town with a smalltown feel."

"It takes the community to build a program like this. It's the kids sacrificing and missing events to wrestle and it's their families giving up their weekends, loading up the car and driving to tournaments."

"As the dust settles and you look back, everyone may not have reached their goals, but I'm proud of all of them."

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